

[Mae Berkeley]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Arts

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview 10

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St., N.Y.C.

DATE January 19, 1939

SUBJECT Negro Folk Arts - Mae Berkeley

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant By staff writer, Frank Byrd.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St., N.Y.C.

DATE January 19, 1939

SUBJECT Negro Folk Arts - Mae Berkeley MAE BERKELEY

Mae Berkeley is probably the most unique merchant in the Park Avenue Market. She is not a licensed peddler and, unlike many of those who are, she does not work at her stand everyday. On the contrary, she puts in her appearance only on those days when she feels particularly good or when the weather is bright and inviting. She is a vendor of native African curios done in clay, brass, wood, straw, ivory and other materials available to the primitive tribes of the African jungles.

How Mae, who lives at 222 West 121 Street, began selling these pieces of native handiwork in the market-place is a surprising story; for Mae herself is not African. She is a product of Trinidad in the British West Indies. She has laways always been tremendously interested, however, in Negro folklore and art, and as a consequence of this, she has sought in almost every direction for additional information concerning every branch of Negro art. Feeling that she could attain a wider and more authentic knowledge by studying the most primitive forms, she naturally turned to the African.

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Her first step was to widen her acquaintance among Africans in New York. Her search for them led to the discovery of the Native African Union at 254 West 135 Street. Here she

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met all or practically all of those who make their homes in Harlem. She also learned that a troupe of native African Ballet Dancers were staging periodic dance recitals at Town Hall, Roerich Hall and, occasionally, in Harlem. Through some of her newly found friends, she was able to study and dance with this group, having already achieved a fair reputation as a dancer in Harlem and Greenwich Village Night Clubs. Her dancing led to more friendly relations and she soon began to inquire as to the possibility of importing native handicraft from the various tribes represented by the group. The idea met with approval and it was not long before she was receiving regular shipments of curios, war-implements etc. from both the South and West Coasts of Africa.

When Mae received her first shipment of goods, she was dancing in a little night club in the Village called the Rubyait [Rubyaait?]. She received permission from the management to sell her things there. Her sales were far more numerous than she expected. It was not long before she had placed parts of her shipment in curio-shops in West fourth and eighth streets. They attracted much attention. Mae decided to branch out to Harlem. She began with free exhibits in the public library and in the homes of various club-women. This gave her the necessary publicity. She let it become known that they could be found either in the Eighth or Park Avenue markets or at the Native African Union.

Mae's sales have increased greatly in the past two years.

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If it were not for her dancing which takes so much of her time, she would probably make a regular, paying business of this hobby. Instead, she devotes only a comparatively small part of her spare time to it. She [does?], however, exhibit her own private collection at all dance recitals of the Group. When asked why she does not open a regular shop or place a helper on each of her stands in both Harlem Markets, she replies:

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“Some day, perhaps, I will. Now, I am much too busy with my dancing. Besides, I don't just want to sell them. I want my people (Negroes) to learn of the value of their native art.”